



Blue Sky Thinkers Consultation: Summary Report 6-8 April 2010

BACKGROUND

1. The recent series of global shocks – food, fuel and finance -- suggests that the nature of today's crises is changing. They are becoming more complex and compound in nature: they are rarely confined to single-issue events; they cross borders and sectors with agility and create dangerous overlays with regional and localized shocks and chronic vulnerabilities. We seem to live in an age of vulnerability, a world of interdependent risk where complex feedback loops cut across geographic, sectoral, and economic boundaries and amplify effects unpredictably. Vulnerable populations are increasingly exposed to the impacts of sudden shocks that push their coping strategies to dangerous limits.
2. The food, fuel and financial crises have also highlighted that we are confronted with a wide information gap between when a global crisis hits vulnerable populations and when data on what is happening finally emerges. Traditional monitoring systems based on statistical data have been effective in tracking medium to longer term development trends, but were not designed to generate the type of information that policy makers need to help vulnerable populations in times of fast-hitting, inter-connected crises.
3. The United Nations' Global Impact and Vulnerability Alert System (GIVAS) seeks to bridge this gap through the design and development of a next generation of analysis and decision support tools that will enable context sensitive collective action. The ability to detect, communicate and analyze successful coping strategies and behavioral changes under duress in real time could be used to help effectively address the information gap at the onset of global crises by complementing existing data with locally reliable, contextually sensitive and relevant real time information.

BELLAGIO BLUE SKY THINKERS WORKSHOP

4. As part of a series of consultations, the GIVAS initiative hosted a Blue Sky Thinkers Workshop at the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Center in Bellagio, Italy, from 6-8 April 2010. The event brought together a diverse group of **13 thought leaders** from academia, the private sector and civil society. Participants had backgrounds in impact and vulnerability analysis; crisis monitoring and early warning systems; and technology innovation for social change.
5. The Blue Sky Thinkers were asked to assist the GIVAS initiative in addressing the following issues:
 - Better understand the changing nature of increasingly cross-sectoral, multiple and compound global crises and the possible implications of this for vulnerable populations;
 - Brainstorm around requirements and opportunities to help global leaders adapt to the new challenges posed by the complex interactions between global, regional and local as well as

chronic crises; and

- Identify existing and new sources of data to better understand this new context as well as the emerging technologies that can be applied to help inform the design and development of a next generation of analysis and decision support tools that will enable context sensitive collective action.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

Throughout the 2-day discussion, the Blue Sky Thinkers emphasized that the GIVAS initiative needed to be relevant at multiple levels of decision making. Several participants suggested that the GIVAS initiative should be conceived as a bottom-up empowerment model rather than a top-down decision making initiative. In the end, there was general agreement that the *GIVAS initiative needed to fuse community empowerment with a decision support system* that could help improve real-time data flows between all three levels of decision making. Specifically, the Blue Sky Thinkers recommended that the GIVAS initiative perform the following functions:

- Provide evidence to enhance global advocacy in the face of unfolding crises;
- Provide tools and information to inform national decision making to protect vulnerable populations; and
- Provide information and services to support local community resilience.

Session 1: Changing nature of complex crises ...

- Participants noted that the impact of crises had always been complex for populations. As a result, responses at household level had always had to be cross-sectoral.
- Participants, however, agreed that the nature of today's crises had changed in comparison to past crises. Crises were more *contagious, interdependent, and faster*. It was noted in this context that technology – while part of the solution – was also often part of the problem, enabling faster cross-border transmission.
- People seemed to react more to crises today than in the past. These reactions differed from crisis to crisis and sometimes created “unfair” imbalances. People, for example, reacted more to “*crises in their backyard*”. In this regard, it was cautioned that crises often opened up greater opportunities for those closer to power. It would be important to clarify who would benefit from GIVAS and how.
- It was also emphasized that crises were *increasingly becoming compound* in nature: forces such as climate change, rapid urbanization and growing inequality should not be excluded from the analysis.
- Global crises were experienced most acutely at the local level. As a result, *local data and knowledge were crucial* for increased resilience at all levels.

Session 2: What GIVAS should be and what it shouldn't be ...

- Participants felt that the GIVAS initiative was *properly aligned* with its global context. Its context analysis mirrored Kofi Annan's concept of “problems without passports”.
- The GIVAS “*authorizing environment*” needed to be built on several elements, namely legitimacy (giving voice to the voiceless), coherence (cross-sectoral analysis), subsidiarity, partnerships (shared objectives) and a clear value proposition.
- It was emphasized that GIVAS needed to choose a strategic direction. Participants saw the GIVAS niche in *protection and adaptation* (capacity building) rather than in crisis mitigation (policy reform) or prediction.

- Participants stressed that the GIVAS initiative needed to *put people at its centre*. However, households' ability to cope with crisis situations depended on relationships at multiple levels, including the family, state and global community level.
- One participant cautioned that the GIVAS focus on vulnerabilities caused by "external shocks" could be interpreted as *misplaced concreteness* given that many shocks were created by internal factors, such as policies, or were rooted in "global policy".
- It was also noted that there was a *slight tension in the GIVAS messaging*. While GIVAS was emphasizing that it was not going to create a new indicator framework (similar to the MDG framework), it did stress that the current set of indicators was inadequate. This needed to be resolved.
- Several participants noted that GIVAS should not "just" be an advocacy tool. It should also be *operational*, empowering local communities.
- There was strong agreement among participants that the GIVAS initiative needed to *include local decision makers* to ensure that household level vulnerabilities would be adequately addressed. It was emphasized that GIVAS should be a service for vulnerable populations. Participants suggested that GIVAS should be conceived as a "global resilience alert system" or a "peer-to-peer" system.
- GIVAS should help with "risk management". It could present a way to reduce "uncertainty", but would not be able to eliminate all risk factors.

Session 3: Challenges and Opportunities

- Several participants emphasized that it was important that sufficient *political will* was in place. This was often not evident until a project got under way. GIVAS needed to be aware of this and continuously test partners' buy-in.
- The GIVAS vision was ambitious – it presented a "complex" (rather than complicated) problem, where the problem and solution needed to go together. The project should "*crawl, walk and only then run*".
- It was emphasized that GIVAS needed to *identify its clients, users and beneficiaries*. The GIVAS "role definition" needed to be clear.
- GIVAS also needed to be clearer on *how it defined success*. In the field of early warning, there was very little agreement on how success should/could be defined.
- Several participants emphasized that the GIVAS initiative needed *incentive structures* to ensure sustainability. The project's value proposition needed to be clear for every level of participation.
- To this end it was suggested, for example, that *local populations* would benefit from more information on effective coping strategies and options in a crisis situation, increased connectedness and sharing of best practices. Aggregated data would enhance *national decision makers'* ability to detect and more effectively shape policy and programmatic responses to emergent trends and unfolding crises. In addition, data could shape the development of locally relevant resilience and vulnerability indicators. Similarly, the *global advocacy community* would benefit from improved data and information flows from the local and national levels.
- There was general agreement that one of the greatest challenges would be to *ensure that available data actually informed local, national and global decision-making*.

Session 4: Data collection and analysis

- It was emphasized that GIVAS needed to *combine "perception-based" data with data that illustrated "what was actually happening"*. In addition, expert modeling could be combined with real-time data on exposure, resilience and impacts.
- Participants saw great value in *pattern recognition* as a means to identify changes in behavior,

in particular anomalies, and assess risk in emergent or ongoing global crises. Context would be critical to make relevant meaning of patterns.

- Given that the GIVAS initiative would be looking at many different types of data streams, data integration would pose a challenge.
- A participant cautioned that the field of “early warning” had become an extractive industry. *Data collection and analysis needed to become more participatory.*
- It was stressed that the GIVAS indicator framework should be able to also *monitor instances of resilience* to capture what was going “right”.
- While GIVAS should be “open source”, it should not be “open data”.
- Several participants suggested that the GIVAS indicator framework should be primarily focused at the country level to provide a complementary “view from below”.
- The Bellagio group noted that they would place data collection and analysis lower on the scale of complexity than organizational change.

Session 5: GIVAS platform

- The GIVAS platform should be *open sourced, innovative, extensible, flexible and adaptive* so that it could be tailored to differing national and local circumstances and needs.
- GIVAS should aim for a *combination of high tech and low tech systems*. Technology should not be the only solution – GIVAS needed to be careful not to crowd out local solutions.
- It should be designed to harness and optimize the wisdom of the crowd, the power of the algorithm and machine intelligence, and the instinct of experts.
- Concerns about data privacy, safety and reliability needed to be addressed. Suggestions ranged from an “opt in” approach to enabling data contributors to authorize data access (tiered, selective, shared, anonymized and aggregated, etc) to providing explanations about where the system is and is not porous.
- The group suggested innovation and bar camps for in-country implementation, and incentivized “grand challenges” or competitive approaches to resolve thorny technical issues to engage the broader software development community.
- Several participants suggested that GIVAS could become a “marketplace” for modules.

NEXT STEPS

The Bellagio Blue Sky thinkers recommended that the GIVAS team move to concrete actions quickly and strategically, including

- Clarify the GIVAS mission and use it consistently to inform UN agencies and other partners;
- Conduct political due diligence;
- Demonstrate what GIVAS can do to build confidence and showcase examples (quick wins);
- Ensure credibility and neutrality through the establishment of expert advisory bodies, for example, a GIVAS Assembly (comprised of UN and other international agencies, national governments, private sector and NGO representatives); and/or an informal Advisory Committee (“Friends of GIVAS”) and/or a GIVAS Commission comprised of experts to facilitate technical and political support.

CONCLUSION

The Blue Sky Thinkers expressed strong support for the GIVAS initiative and expressed their interest in sustained engagement. Data and design issues were generally seen to be of lower order complexity than the needed organizational changes. In order to establish itself effectively, the GIVAS team was advised to *proceed carefully, iterate frequently, and to leverage existing projects and networks.*